At a church in Pine Bluff in the mid-1960's a black family applied for membership. The church board met to consider it. Of all those present only my friend and the preacher argued to admit the black family. The preacher quoted Jesus' Golden Rule, but the chairman of the board, now frothing and red-faced, retorted, "I don't give a damn what Jesus said, what does the Bible say?" That's got to be a classic of some sort. — *Neal Buffaloe, First Christian Church, Conway Ar.*

Maybe a college education is not necessary, but before a person speaks in public he should at least read a book on public speaking. He needs to learn to speak up, look at the audience and keep his hands away from his mouth. My hearing is leaving me, and that is the case with one-fourth of the average church. Sometime an entire chapter will be read without the reader looking at the audience even once. Another thing: We are stowing money in the bank and helping no one. What I want for us is love, consideration, understanding, unity. I am tired of bigotry. I am 85. — *Gladys Crumpacker, Pollock, Mo.*

## BOOK NOTES

If you are a William Barclay reader you should not miss the last book he ever wrote, *A Spiritual Autobiography,* which is delightful reading. We can send it to you for $2.75 postpaid.

F. F. Bruce's *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* is a remarkably resourceful volume, a kind of library on Paul. It is the kind of book that one can start reading at any place and profit richly. At more than 500 pages and hardbound it is a bargain at $21.95 postpaid.

I have been reading a new book by Lesslie Newbigin, a longtime ecumenical leader and missionary in India, on *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society.* It is well titled, for he not only shows how pluralistic our nation and world has become but how the claims of Christ as unique Savior relate to a society that no longer accepts absolutes. $15.95 postpaid.

Books by Olan Hicks on divorce and remarriage are back in print. His larger study, 306 pages, *What the Bible Says About Divorce and Remarriage,* is available at $14.95 postpaid. His shorter study, *The Issue Made Clear,* is only $4.95 postpaid.

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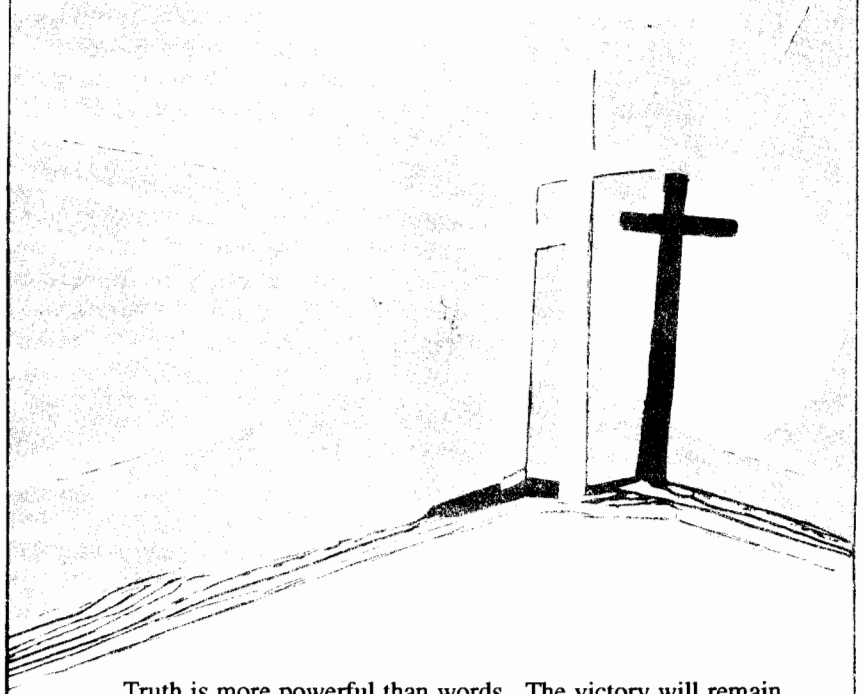

Truth is more powerful than words. The victory will remain with him who with stammering lips shall teach the truth, and not with him who eloquently puts forward a lie.--*Martin Luther*

**In This Issue:**

**Is Hell Fire Endless?**
**They Laid the Egg that Luther Hatched**

**Volume 32, No. 9** **Leroy Garrett, Editor** **November, 1990**

*The Hope of the Believer...No. 19*

## IS HELL FIRE ENDLESS?

I begin with the assumption that we will all agree, if we stop to think about it, that the "fire" of hell is a figurative term and cannot be taken literally. Just as "the street of the city is pure gold" that describes heaven (Rev. 21:21) is figurative, so is "the lake of fire and brimstone" that describes hell (Rev. 20:10). That the fire of hell is figurative takes nothing away from its horror is as evident as that the gold of heaven is symbolic takes nothing from its magnificence. When God speaks to us it has to be in symbols that we can understand. Gold is precious and splendid, so he tells us that heaven is like that. Fire is dreadful and painful, so he tells us that hell is like that.

There are only three possible positions to take as to the nature of hell fire in regards to its duration. The traditional view is that it is everlasting in the sense of being unending. The conditionalist view holds that hell fire is consuming, annihilating the wicked but not tormenting them unendingly. The universalist or restorationist view is that hell fire is purgatorial in that it punishes the wicked and cleanses them of their sin and ultimately restores them to God and to heaven, which means that by God's grace eventually everyone will be saved.

There you have the three views: unending torment of the wicked; destruction of the wicked (after just punishment); corrective punishment of the wicked but eventual redemption.

My position in this installment of the hope of the believer is that in the light of Scripture the first position (the traditional view) is untenable and unacceptable. It is the least acceptable of all three positions in that it has an impossible theology. That God would raise the wicked and give them immortality only to torment them in a devil's hell unendingly is both gross and vulgar, even blasphemous. Such a God is not the one described in the Bible.

The third view is a modified universalism in that it recognizes that there are indeed wicked people who will go to hell and will be punished for their sins. But the God of love and mercy cannot and will not lose the vast majority of the souls he created. He will eventually redeem all creation — the world, the universe, and all mankind. So hell fire will be penetential. The wicked will be purged of their sins, justly punished, some with few stripes and some with many, but in the end God will be victorious and all souls will be his for eternity. This fulfills Paul's promise of "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Cor 15:22). Not a tiny fraction, but all, eventually.

This view is both philosophically and theologically persuasive, even intuitively persuasive, for we are inclined to conclude that yes, of course, that is what we would



expect of a God who is "eager to show mercy" and is not willing that any should perish, and it also satisfies God's justice in that the wicked are punished. But it has a serious problem in that it is more theological than biblical. Biblical evidence is strong that the wicked will be finally and eternally lost, however tragic and unacceptable that may appear to us. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life" (Rom. 6:22) is unequivocal. If the wicked eventually die because of their sins then they are dead forever, never to live again, or so it seems.

That passage, by the way, comes near singlehandedly proving the "consuming fire" position. If the wicked die, then they do not "live forever" in hell fire. Moreover, this passage states a crucial truth that is often overlooked: that immortality is not innate in people but is a gift of God. Only God has immortality (1 Tim. 6:16). We are not destined to live forever, either in heaven or hell, simply because we are human beings, for human beings are mortal. To the contrary, we are all destined to die, not only because of our sins but because we are finite creatures. We live forever only if God gives us immortality, which he does in Jesus Christ to those who believe.

There are other texts that indicate that the wicked will perish or be destroyed (after being punished in hell fire), such as Mt. 10:28, "Fear rather Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Again and again the Bible says that "The wicked shall perish," as in Ps. 37:20 and Ezek. 18:4. Mal. 4:1 describes the wicked as being "stubble," as being "burned up," and as having "neither root or branch." Jesus makes it plain in Mt. 10:40-43: the wicked, like the tares of the parable, will be cast into the furnace of fire and burned. As for Paul he makes it clear that the end of the wicked is "eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:9). In Gal. 6:8 the apostle says that the one who sows to the flesh shall reap corruption or destruction, while the one who sows to the Spirit shall reap everlasting life.

Nowhere in Scripture will you find the idea that God bestows upon the wicked everlasting (unending) life or immortality so that he can then torment them forever in hell fire. The wicked die forever for two reasons: they do not have the gift of immortality, and they have to receive the wages earned for their life of sin, which is death.

It goes without saying that the traditional view of unending torment for the lost has what appears to be strong biblical support, even if it does contradict the above references. I can here make response only to a few of the passages that are resorted to that make God "an eternal fiend that tortures his enemies forever," as Robert Ingersoll put it.

One incontrovertible prooftest is said to be Rev. 14:10,11 where "the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night." Apart from what poetic license may be taken in such a symbolic book as Revelation, the idea of torment being forever does not necessarily mean endless. If you trace the

word through Scripture you will find numerous things described as "forever" that were not endless but endured as long as necessary to fulfill their purpose, such as the Jewish passover being forever (Ex. 12:24) and Solomon's temple being forever (1 Kgs. 8:13).

The word "eternal" (or everlasting) is also used in ways to suggest endlessness, such as in Mt. 25:41, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." When coupled with verse 46 where "everlasting punishment" and "eternal life" are both used, this argument appears impregnable. The everlasting punishment has to be as enduring as the eternal life, they argue.

While it is true that eternal or everlasting does sometimes mean never ending, it is not always the case. Jude 7 refers to Sodom and Gomorrah being destroyed by "eternal fire," but those cities are not still burning. A similar reference in 2 Pet. 2:6 says those wicked cities were reduced to ashes and condemned to destruction, which is what eternal fire meant. That is, it was fire that burned until it accomplished its purpose.

"Eternal," whether in reference to punishment or life refers more to result than to process, and it is more qualitative than quantitative. The point of "eternal life" is not that it is unending but that it is life with God. And so "eternal punishment" does not mean that it goes on forever (What father would punish a child endlessly?) but that its result cannot be undone. It is the result, not the act of punishing, that is unending. So with "eternal destruction": the process of being destroyed is not perpetual but its result is final and irreversible. Sodom was destroyed and stayed destroyed, that is "eternal destruction." So with the wicked. They are "eternally destroyed" or are burned in "eternal fire" without existing forever.

The basic issue in all this is the nature of immortality. If we concede that only God is immortal, as the Scriptures tell us, then no one "puts on immortality" (1 Cor 15:53) except as it is given him of God. The Bible nowhere indicates that the wicked have endless existence or immortality. If God extends it to them, it would be so they could be tortured in perpetuity, and this is risky theology.

That God raises all the dead, including the wicked, is clear enough. But does he raise the dead to give them endless existence and perpetual punishment? Or is it not to judge them? He judges them, condemns them for their sins, and punishes them in hell. In exactly what way he punishes them or for how long we do not know, but it is probably determined by the severity of the sin, some with many stripes, others with few. Then at last they are destroyed, finally and forever.

This is the conditional view, meaning that immortality is not given to all people unconditionally, but only to those to whom he bestows grace and salvation through Jesus Christ.

This impresses me as the most defensible view when all of Scripture is considered. It liberates the Christian faith from teaching a dogma that tempts people to see God as some cosmic fiendish savage. If the God of heaven subjects innumerable billions to unending and indescribable torment, it can only be seen as the one infinite horror.

If on the other hand it is as Paul says, "The wages of sin is death," it will be seen as at least understandable if not just. Even men sometimes execute their fellows for crimes committed. But when they hang them or electrocute them they do not keep on hanging them or electrocuting them in perpetuity. They are hanged or electrocuted "forever" in that its result is final and cannot be repealed. — *the Editor*



## WHY DO CHRISTIANS DIVIDE?

In a recent issue of the *Firm Foundation,* published in Austin, Texas, the associate editor set forth a premise "On Splintering" that I question. He says splintering or divisions among Christians is caused by convictions. Where there are no convictions there are no divisions, he says, and, oddly enough, applies this to our sisters and brothers in the Christian Churches, to wit:

> Members of the Independent Christian Church have wide areas of disagreement, but they have no division because they have no conviction. The withering gaze of their constituents makes them afraid to lift a dissenting voice, and therefore they are at peace. They have the same peace as a rock, or the common clod. They enjoy the unity of a vacuum.

One is tempted to conclude off hand that it is this kind of ungracious and unloving spirit that causes far more splintering than a barrel full of convictions.

If the associate editor knew as many folk in the Christian Church as I know and had as many conversations with them as I have had, he would know better than to say that they have no convictions. Their list of convictions may not be precisely the same as the editor's, particularly in reference to marginal issues, but they certainly have their convictions. I would say after many years of associating with both Churches of Christ and Christian Churches that there is no substantial difference in terms of a "level of conviction." When it comes to the basics of the faith, such as Jesus Christ and him crucified and the seven ones of Eph. 4, we are all in both churches equally persuaded and equally convicted. There are many in both churches who would die for their faith, if it came to that, including the associate editor of the *Firm Foundation.* I would only urge our fellow editor to be more gracious toward his sisters and brothers who disagree with him in non-crucial areas, such as the use or nonuse of instrumental music. People who would die together for their faith surely have a great deal in common — far more than they have differences.

Nor is the editor correct in saying that there are no divisions among our Christian Church brothers. Within the lifetime of many of us they separated themselves from the Disciples of Christ. And even as a separate fellowship they have not been without their conflicts and altercations, and it would not be going too far to say that their many Bible colleges tend to line up on one side or another on various issues. There is presently a rather serious confrontation among some of their leaders over the claims of Fundamentalism, especially in reference to inerrancy. For our brother editor to suggest that they are of "one heart and one mind" is as erroneous as to say that they have no convictions.

If our brethren in Christian Churches have not been as divisive as we in the Churches of Christ (the *Firm Foundation* editor quotes a source that lists sixteen divisions among Churches of Christ), it is not likely to have any bearing upon either the number or the intensity of convictions. It is not differing convictions or opinions that cause Christians to divide, but the attitude they have toward each other over those differences. There are many believers who hold varying convictions on numerous matters who go right on accepting each other in a loving fellowship. They disagree but they are not disagreeable. This is what our pioneers meant by "In matters of opinion (differences in conviction), liberty."

Divisions are caused by making a law of God of our opinions and convictions and by making a test of fellowship where God has not made one. Every Christian has the right to his or her own conviction so long as it is sincerely held and is consistent with what he or she believes the Bible to teach. In fact one *must* be true to his convictions, for "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). But the same chapter teaches that one must not judge his brother who holds a different view: "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (verse 5). This clearly shows that the convictions or scruples may differ without fellowship and unity being impaired. Such is the force of Rom. 14:1: "Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things."

This means that splintering, fracturing, and dividing is a sin. In Gal. 5:20 "parties, factions, and divisions" are listed as carnal and as sins that keep us from inheriting the kingdom of God. We are called to be peacemakers, not piecemakers. We are to receive one another with all our errors and weaknesses, for that is the way Christ received us (Rom. 15:7). To do otherwise is to sin against God's law of love.

It could be argued that we divide because we do not really love one another as Christ has loved us (Jn. 13:34), for it is love that is the bond of perfect unity (Col. 3:14). Christians who love each other do not divide, just as couples do not divorce so long as they really love each other. It is not oneness of opinion or doctrinal conformity that holds a couple or a church together, but mutual love and affection.

Another motto of our pioneers says it well, "We are free to differ but not to divide." They meant of course that we are free to differ on non-essentials of the faith,



for they insisted on "In essentials, unity." They also claimed that nothing can be made essential that God has not made necessary for going to heaven. The essentials are what the Bible clearly and distinctly says, not what we think it means by what it says.

We are free to differ because there is no way for us to see everything exactly alike. God called us to be our unique selves, not carbon copies of each other.

But we are not free to divide. The reason is because division among Christians is "a horrid evil, fraught with many evils; it is anti-Christian, anti-Scriptural, and anti-natural," to quote Thomas Campbell. The reason we divide and sub-divide as we do is because we do not really believe what the Bible says on the subject or what Thomas Campbell was talking about. And so we sin against God, against Christ's law of love, against holy Scripture, and against our own heritage as a unity movement.

There is but one answer to all this. We must repent of the sin of division. — *the Editor*

*Heroes and Reformers of History...No. 9*

## THEY LAID THE EGG THAT LUTHER HATCHED

It was on the eve of All-Souls Day, October 31, 1517 that an obscure monk, a professor at the University of Wittenberg, posted his 95 Thesis on the door of the Castle Church in which he called for a disputation on the sale of indulgences. It proved to be the act that launched the Protestant Reformation, and it is extolled by some historians as the most significant event in the history of mankind next to the resurrection of Christ. It changed the course of modern history.

The news of what Martin Luther did on that day spread like wildfire all across Europe. In a matter of weeks every university campus and most every church was aflame with excitement. The pope in Rome was disturbed. It seemed unreal that an obscure monk could declare war against an entrenched clergy and even the pope and thus stir the whole of Europe.

The pope soon issued a bull (decree) against the daring monk, threatening excommunication. Luther, who by then had denied the authority of the pope and the infallibility of general councils, burned the bull in a public spectacle. Excommunication finally came in 1521. Luther spent the next 25 years preaching the gospel of salvation by faith rather than by works. In defiance of pope and Emperor alike he issued book after book, advocating the priesthood of all believers. He

translated the New Testament into the vernacular of the German people. He insisted that God's only communication with mankind is through the Scriptures.

His stand against the pope and the Emperor fired the imagination of Europe. He put the ordinary Christian on his theological feet. As he called for freedom in Christ his followers multliplied. Protestantism was born. Except for the protection of his friends he would surely have died the martyr's death for what he did.

Luther of course had no idea what he was starting when he posted those theses to the cathedral door. It was the normal thing to do if one wanted to call for a discussion of some issue. And it wasn't that Luther did not then still believe in indulgences. It was the abuse of them that he was questioning, "the holy trade" it was unblushingly called.

The poor, ignorant people that bought the indulgences did so because they had a mortal fear of lingering in purgatory, the place where the last vestige of sin had to be burned away before one could enter heaven. They were assured of going to heaven if they died with the blessings of the priest. It was time in purgatory they wanted to shorten, not only for themselves but for their loved ones. Those who sold the indulgences told the people that a loved one would be released from purgatory the moment their money rang in the collection plate. It was such abuses that stirred Luther to issue his challenge.

What Luther did would have been no more than another priestly dispute, which is what the pope first called it, except that there were forces at work that neither Luther nor the pope knew about. For upwards of two centuries the church and the world were being prepared for what happened on that cold October day in Wittenberg in 1517. The great events that change history never happen in a vacuum. There were those heroes and reformers that were "unto Luther" and who prepared the soil for the seed he sowed. Or to change the metaphor, when Luther set fire to the papal bull and ignited a conflagration over all of Europe it was because his forerunners had issued thousands of torches throughout the land, ready to be lighted in such splendor as to obliterate much of the darkness of papal Rome.

The monks complained that it was Desiderius Erasmus, the Christian humanist, that laid the egg that Luther hatched. This is to say there would have been no Luther had there not been an Erasmus. Originally a monk himself, Erasmus left his order when he was convinced that such a life was not for him. Using the weapon of "enlightened common sense," he authored satires that critized the Roman church for its ignorance, superstition, and obscurantism. One of his books that examined the practices of the church went through 600 editions! He was devastating in his attacks upon the corruption in the Roman church. But his greatest contribution was his epoch-making edition of the Greek New Testament, the first ever printed, which appeared one year before Luther burned the papal bull.

Erasmus, however, was but one of Luther's forerunners. Equally important



was Johann Gutenberg, the German who invented the printing press. He had his new creation perfected well enough for it to produce the Gutenberg Bible in 1456, the first complete book known to be printed in the Christian world. For sometime the new invention was kept a trade secret, but by the time Luther was born in 1483 printing was well established throughout Europe. Up until then everything had to be laboriously copied by hand. The Reformation would have been impossible without the miracle of printing. Luther used it in pamphlet after pamphlet as his reformation truths found their way into the homes of the rich and poor alike.

Earlier still was a Franciscan priest, William of Occam, who died around 1350. He paved the way for Reformation theology by being one of the first prominent figures to question the presumptions of the papacy. He insisted that only Christ is the head of the church and if there must be a papacy it should be made up of a college of popes so as to distribute power. Once he rejected papal authority in secular matters, it was necessary for him to flee and take refuge among those who could protect him. As a logician he also set forth a principle that would prove liberating to the church and world alike if it were heeded, which came to be called "Occam's razor." He put it this way: "What can be said with fewer words is done in vain with more." This means to apply the razor and cut away all the excess baggage. Speak to the point with an economy of words! Put a point on what you have to say and make your ideas clear! Luther learned this lesson well, for pope and peasant alike had no problem understanding him.

Those who edit journals and preach sermons, as well as reformers like Luther, would do well to learn the lesson of Occam's razor.

And of course John Wyclif must be included in our list of heroes unto Luther, for he was the first to produce an English Bible from the Latin Vulgate. Dying in 1384, he advocated Reformation ideas almost a century and a half before Luther. He opposed the doctrine of transubstantiation, the presumptions of the clergy, and taught that believers do not need a priest to mediate with God for them. His followers were known as Lollards, who claimed that everyone should have access to the Bible. They helped to prepare the way for Luther in the next century. Thirty years after his death Wyclif was condemned as a heretic by the Council of Constance. His body was disinterred from holy ground in 1427. But this pales before what Pope Stephen VI did back in the tenth century when he had the body of his predecessor disinterred, propped up in a chair and tried for heresy. Once condemned, the former pope's body was thrown in a river.

Then there was John Hus who died as a martyr in 1415 for the cause of church reform. He was indebted to Wyclif for some of his views. He stressed the authority of the Bible and the importance of preaching the gospel. He believed that neither popes nor cardinals could establish doctrines contrary to the Scriptures, nor should Christians obey them when they are wrong. He condemned the sale of indulgences long before Luther, and he pled for purity of life in a time of clerical wantonness.

He was invited to the same council that condemned Wyclif, presumably under safe conduct, but he was tried, condemned, and burned at the stake with never an opportunity to defend himself. This led to the formation of the Hussite Church among the Czechs, a "Protestant" church long before Luther.

Girolamo Savonarola died as a martyr for being a preacher of reform not all that far from the pope himself — in Florence, Italy where he captured the hearts of the people by his charismatic preaching. His powerful preaching at first lifted him to high positions in the church in Florence, but things changed when he began to cry out against the corrupt papal court. At one of the carnivals in the city he persuaded the people to make a bon fire of their cosmetics, pornographic books, and gambling equipment. His anti-papal views led to his excommunication and execution.

Earlier still were the Waldensians who go back to the twelfth century, led by Peter Waldo. They too reacted against the worldly clergy that led the church during most of the medieval centuries. Their commitment to lives of purity and poverty stood in bold contrast to the corrupt clergy. They eventually claimed to be the only true church. When the pope condemned them as heretics it only convinced them further that the Roman church was the "Whore of Babylon." They rejected everything that was uniquely Roman Catholic — purgatory, feast-days, papal authority, holy water, prayers to images of the saints. By the time of Luther their views had penetrated much of Europe and became a part of the Lutheran reformation.

Perhaps more important than any of these was a movement that worked quietly for reform within the mainline Roman church known as Devotio Moderna or the modern way of serving God. It was a spiritual revival within the Roman Catholic Church itself. It had been working slowly but surely like leaven for almost 200 years before Luther. It was led by no one particular reformer but by many who resolved to live changed lives. Many of them were pious monks and devout mystics who quietly worked for reform in schools and monasteries.

Some of these were called the "Brethren of the Common Life" who chose to live the simple life and to honor Christ by working with their own hands. One such mystic was Thomas a' Kempis who wrote the *Imitation of Christ*. The book is utterly centered in Christ, who is the only one that can be the heart and soul of any real revival. The book was esteemed next to the Bible in this quiet revolution within the church. After all, Jesus Christ was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation, and those in the Devotio Moderna who really discovered Christ in their lives were the ones that lighted their torches from the flame ignited by Luther. They were ready when he was. Luther by no means stood alone.

All this shows that God is at work in ways that we have no way of even imagining. It is only centuries later that we can begin to see, and then only dimly, how God was at work in bringing about his purposes. This story helps us to see that whether it is a mechanic working on a printing press, a translator poring over old manuscripts, a fiery preacher lifting up Christ in the streets, a movement within the church rededicating itself to Christlikeness, or an obscure monk calling for reform, no one ever has to stand alone.



God is always there in the shadows watching over his own. He is always faithful. And it is certain that if one lights a torch for more light and freedom for God's people there will be others waiting to light their torches from his. It is wonderfully encouraging to know that our labor for the Lord is never in vain. And the more we shake our torches the brighter they burn.— *the Editor*

## THE NATURE AND BASIS OF FELLOWSHIP

(On a Saturday afternoon in October I set forth my views on the nature and basis of Christian fellowship at the First Christian Church in Commerce, Texas. David Gibson, a local Church of Christ minister, responded in a reasonable and resourceful manner. Charles Turner, a teacher at East Texas State University and interim minister at First Christian, presided. There was vigorous and interesting audience participation. It was not a debate but an open and free discussion. A good spirit prevailed and we all learned more about a very crucial subject for our time. I would encourage more studies of this kind. I thought you might be interested in seeing the principles I set forth that served as the basis for the exchange of ideas. The attending comments are a summary of what I said about each principle. The occasion was all the more meaningful since this is the first time any friendly exchange had taken place since the Christian Church divided into two churches back at the turn of the century over instrumental music. It had a bitter end. One side broke the lock and took over the building, the other side went to court. The court ruled, as they always did in such cases, that the introduction of things like Sunday schools and instruments does not constitute a departure from the original intent of the movement. The Disciples got the building and the Church of Christ moved across the street, and finally to another part of town. They quit speaking to each other for the next 90 years, until the other Saturday. When I spoke at the First Christian Church the following Sunday it was the first time this century that a friendly voice from the Church of Christ had been heard in their assembly.- *the Editor)*

*l. Fellowship is not agreement in doctrine as much as it is a relationship between persons based upon mutual discipleship of Jesus Christ.*

The word that is the basis of our study, fellowship, comes from the Greek word *koinonia* which means by definition "fellowship, partnership" (Analytical Greek Lexicon). The affix *ship* is the key to understanding the meaning in that it implies a relationship between persons: a partnership joins partners; a fellowship joins fellows. Koinonia has to do with persons, not things or even ideas. We have

fellowship with each other, not with things like Sunday schools or instrumental music or ideas like inerrancy or premillennialism.

In reading the massive Theological Dictionary of the New Testament on the meaning of *koinonia* one finds such definitions as "brotherly fellowship of believers," "inward fellowship on a religious basis," and "an expression of the full fellowship established by common faith in Christ." This means that fellowship is the sharing of a common life, which is the way the New English Bible renders *koinonia*. It never uses the word fellowship. Compare, for instance, the King James Version of 1 Jn. 1:7 ("If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another") with that of the New English ("If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, then we share together a common life").

I suggest we let this serve as our working definition of fellowship: sharing together a common life in Christ.

My first principle says that we who share a common life in Christ (fellowship) do so not because we agree on all doctrinal matters, for it is self-evident both in Scripture and in our own experience that we do not, but because we have a common bond in Christ. We are united "in Christ" in spite of our differences.

*2. Fellowship is not contingent upon or made necessary by approval or endorsement of any opinion, interpretation, or practice as much as it is the sharing of a common life in Christ. We can therefore differ on many things and still be united in Christ and in fellowship with one another.*

I can work alongside the likes of Mother Teresa in ministering to the dying on the streets of Calcutta without endorsing or approving of what she might believe and practice as a Roman Catholic. We "share the common life" in serving the needy not because she is Roman Catholic and I a member of the Church of Christ, but because we are both seeking to follow Christ in helping others. Mother Teresa and I have some serious differences, but we have the one precious thing in common, a desire to follow Christ and to be like him, and that is the basis of fellowship. So it was with Paul and Peter. They had such differences that on one occasion Paul rebuked Peter to his face (Gal. 2:14), and yet they extended to each other "the right hand of fellowship" when they went their separate ways to preach the same gospel, Peter to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:9).

*3. We have no control (nor can we make any determination) over who is in the fellowship and who is not, or who is our sister or brother in Christ and who is not, for it is God who calls us into the fellowship, and only He can cast us out. Therefore, wherever God has a child, we have a sister or brother that we are to accept as such.*

The Scriptures could not be clearer on this point: "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9). It is God who calls us to share the common life in Christ, and according to 2 Thess. 2:14 we are called by the gospel. All who believe and obey the gospel are called of



God into the fellowship of his Son.

We have no say as to who is in the family of God and who is not. It is like my father's family. There were eight of us children and I was next to the youngest. My mother thought she was through having children when I came along, but when I was six years old Bill was born. They took me to my mother's bedside to meet the new member of the family. They did not ask me whether I would accept him. He was my brother, for he was begotten of my father and born of my mother. I had nothing to do with it, and I had no choice but to accept him. I was stuck with him!

That is the way it is with sisters and brothers in Christ. We are stuck with each other, bonded together in the love of Christ, warts and all, differences and all.

*4. We are under apostolic mandate to accept all those who are "in Christ," even as Christ accepted us, unconditionally.*

The apostle Paul says it plainly in Ro. 15:7: "Therefore receive one another, just as Christ received us, to the glory of God." A helpful rule of interpretation is: when you come to a "Therefore" stop and ask what it is there for. The "Therefore" here goes back to the previous chapter where the apostle enjoins that Christians may disagree without passing judgment on each other. "Who are you to judge another's servant?," he asks of those who would reject a brother over differences. "To his own master he stands or falls," he adds, noting that each of us is responsible for what he believes only to the Lord, not to each other. Three times in Ro. 14 he charges that we are not to judge our brother or sister.

Then in Ro. 15:7 he says "Therefore" — in view of all that I have said — "receive one another as Christ has received us." It is an adverb of manner -- *as* Christ received us. He says elsewhere that Christ received us when we were weak and when we were sinners, even when we were "in error" and wrong about a lot of things — unconditionally by grace! That is how we are to receive each other, and when we do that it is to the glory of God. When we receive each other on our own terms or by the rules of the party it is to our own glory or the glory of the party, not to the glory of God.

*5. There are only two biblical grounds for a church withdrawing fellowship from one of its members: heresy, which is disloyalty to Jesus Christ, and moral turpitude.*

No one in Scripture is ever disciplined, disenfranchised, or withdrawn from simply for being honestly mistaken or even for inadvertently falling into sin. It is always one who has become morally corrupt, or insincere, self-serving, and self-condemned (in that he knows he is doing wrong); and those who seek to deceive, lead the innocent astray, and divide the Body of Christ. These are those that the Bible calls false teachers, as in 1 Pet. 2:1. In the Bible a false teacher is never one who simply holds an erroneous position. He is rather one with a bad heart and evil intent, one bent upon destruction.

Such a one is referred to in Tit. 1:10: "Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition." The "divisive man" is a heretic or sectarian, one who is bent upon forming a party or sect around himself, dividing the Body of Christ. The next verse describes his spirit: he is "warped and sinning, being self-condemned."

Such a one is to be warned, and, if possible, saved from his evil course. But if continued effort is of no avail he is to be rejected, so as to safeguard the church. Here the line of fellowship must be drawn. In 2 Jn. 9 he is described as one "who transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ. The context indicates that the heretic is one who denies Christ, and he is called anti-Christ (1 Jn. 2:23).

Fellowship may also be withdrawn from the one who is morally base, one who is unrepentant, one who has given his life over to persistent sin. This is not the person who out of weakness is "overtaken in a trespass." Such a one is to be restored "in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal. 6:1). It is moral turpitude that cannot be tolerated, as with the fornicator in 1 Cor. 5, who went right on living in open sin with his step-mother. The apostle charged that such a one be "delivered unto Satan" by the assembled church, for it was Satan he now served. This is clearly a case of one being excluded from the fellowship of the church.

*6. Loyalty to Christ or Christlikeness (or a sincere desire to so be) is the only condition of fellowship between Christians.*

This principle is basic to our heritage in the Stone-Campbell movement as well as rooted in Scripture. The very first Church of Christ in this country, made up of former Methodists who resolved they would be Christians only and take the Bible as their only rule of faith and practice, drew up what they called "Cardinal Principles of the Christian Church." One principle was, "Christlikeness the only rule of Church fellowship." It was a remarkable insight for a rude frontier people who were caught up in a morass of man-made creeds.

We have a way of accepting folk so long as they parrot the party line and support our institutional system, however unlike Christ they may be. And we often reject those among us who are most like Christ — only because they veer from the party line.

Our Lord laid down the one basic test when he issued the invitation, "Come, follow me." All who sincerely heed that call and follow him the best they know how are those who share the common life. "Whoever desires to come after me," he said, laying down the rule that we are slow to accept, "let him take up his cross, and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). Those who are Christlike, or who desire to be, have one precious thing in common. They are sharing the common life in Christ, and that is what fellowship is all about.

*7. A true Christian is, therefore, one "who believes that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and obeys him in all things according to his understanding" (Alexander Campbell).*



This definition from brother Campbell should go far in helping us to understand, in the light of Scripture, the nature of fellowship. It is helpful because it takes into consideration both the mind and heart of a person. It recognizes that one might be wrong about some things but right about what really matters, loyalty to Jesus Christ. It points up a distinction that Campbell often made between errors of the mind and errors of the heart. Errors of the heart, such as willful neglect or insincerity, are much more serious than errors of the mind, such as a mistaken interpretation.

## WILL WE SELF-DESTRUCT?

Douglas Hale

It appears that what we call "the church of Christ" is bent on destroying itself. Everywhere one looks congregations are in trouble — members are leaving, preachers are being fired, elders face tremendous stress, young people are discouraged, contributions are down. If a congregation is not facing these difficulties at the present time, it will almost certainly have to deal with them soon.

Is there something built into our system that causes such turmoil? Are we doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over? I believe the answer to both questions is yes. Unless we change some of our attitudes and beliefs, the church of Christ will one day be just a memory, only a footnote in church history. What is it that we must change?

First, our preoccupation with doctrine and issues. Our history is clouded with divisions over issues such as Bible classes, Communion, congregational cooperation, instrumental music, missionary societies, premillenialism. Even now we are facing the threat of further division over the role of women, divorce and remarriage, the meaning of baptism, spiritual gifts, and fellowship. There is no end to such controversies. We will never come to complete agreement on these matters.

So how can unity and harmony be realized? By focusing on one thing, the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives. On this we can agree and it is the only thing that really matters!

Second, we must change our emphasis on personalities. Our history is marked by division over strong personalities such as preachers, elders, editors, college presidents. Certainly we have had many great leaders among us, but to follow any

man is destructive. To allow any human being to determine where and when we will attend church, or what we will believe, or what causes we will support, is a grave mistake.

Men are just that — men — with sins, weaknesses, blind spots, errors, and all the other blemishes that go with being human. While we should love people and develop loyalties to each other, our trust and obedience must be to one Person, Jesus Christ.

Third, we need to change our attitudes toward material things. Too often our attention is centered on buildings, budgets and attendance. These things are not bad in themselves, but Christianity is not really about such things. People can be Christians without a building at all, or when they have one located in a poor part of town. They can serve God whether they have a budget or not. They can be faithful to Him by themselves as well as in a congregation of a thousand.

It may sound like a wornout cliche, but we must focus our attention and energy on Jesus Christ and we must guide others to honor him as the sovereign Lord. Theology, personalities and material things must all be brought into subjection to Him. Then the church of Christ will experience unity, continuity and growth.

"Christ is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything" (Col. 1:18). — *2816 54th St., Lubbock, Tx. 79413*

## THE THREE TREES IN EDEN

Cecil Hook

Usually we speak of the two trees in the Garden of Eden, but there were three kinds of trees there. Even though you may be more convinced than I am that they were literal trees, I think that you will agree that they had symbolic meanings. Let's look for the messages that they convey.

"And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9). We will consider them in order.

1. There was the tree that was pleasant to the sight and good for food. We will suppose that the inhabitants of the garden could have eaten of that tree for bodily sustenance without eating of either of the other two trees. Even though food and aesthetic enjoyment are needful and are amoral in nature, such a diet of "bread alone" would only serve the temporary, earthly needs of man. It would be a non-spiritual existence holding no hope or promise. Countless millions of our kind have eaten only of that tree, and they have died without hope.



There was the tree of life in the middle of the garden. Its centrality speaks of both its importance and its availability. Adam and Eve had unhindred fellowship with God who was their source of life. As long as they desired, they could sustain that relationship. Eating of that tree, they would never die — never be separated from their life-giver and sustainer.

The first pair did not merit or earn such a blessing. It was the grace of life, a gift bestowed by God upon them in acceptance of them as his own creatures. It was the same grace that is bestowed upon us through Christ when we become and live as sons of God. It is a living relationship in fellowship with our Creator.

Those who continue to partake of that spiritual tree through Christ will not be surprised to find its perpetuated blessing in the eternal garden of God, for "To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7).

3. Then there was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why would it be forbidden and so deadly? Did God want his creatures to be ignorant of right and wrong? When God gave them permission to eat of the other trees and forbade their eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he gave them some knowledge of good and evil then and there. That prohibition was a law which they knew and understood. What, then, does this tree symbolize?

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the antithesis of the tree of life. One sustained life; the other brought death. If the tree of life represented the grace of God, then the tree of the knowledge of good and evil must depict something contrary to grace. In his book, *There Were Two Trees In The Garden*, Rick Joynor rightly concludes that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the law. We can propose only two possible means for our justification — grace or law. It seems that the eating of one tree pictures the acceptance of grace and the eating of the other illustrates man's inclination to seek greater knowledge of law in order to attain, to merit, or to achieve his right standing before God through it. In all ages man's efforts in that area have resulted in total failure.

Laws were given to define sin: "Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin" (Rom. 7:7). Law gives us the knowledge of good and evil. Paul says that what he thought would bring life to him brought death. "The power of sin is the law," Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:56). Sin has a venemous sting which brings death. Law brings death, for no one can keep law perfectly, and law offers no promise of life. If a person could live without violating law, he or she would only be maintaining original innocence rather than receiving life from the law. Man is dependent wholly on grace.

We desire to be like God in discerning law so we may attain God-likeness

through keeping it. The tree of legal righteousness appears to be good spiritual food, producing righteous people who are a delight to look upon, making us wise scholars (lawyers!) of the word. When one partakes, however, his eyes are opened to his own ignorance, nakedness, and vulnerability. How sad it is that, instead of confessing how bare we are and accepting grace, we try to cover ourselves with insecure works of righteousness — flimsy, scratchy, and inadequate as our fig leaves prove to be.

Although Paul was not writing about the three trees in Eden, his letter to the Romans could serve as a commentary about those trees. There were the Gentiles trying to live by the tree of earthly sustenance, the Jews and Judaizers who trusted in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the faithful who trust in the grace and imputed righteousness of the tree of life. In typical manner, an animal was killed to hide Adam's shame. A Lamb gave his life to cover ours. He is that tree of life who gives us unhindred fellowship with God.

Those three trees are still in our garden of life. We may eat freely of the first two, but it will be fatal if we let the serpent beguile us so that we partake of the third tree. — *1350 Huisache, New Braunfels, Tx 78130*

## OUR CHANGING WORLD

A friend of ours in the Denton area attended the Church Growth International Convention hosted by the Yoida Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, and on his return gave us the following information. Paul Chou's church has 620,000 members, by far the largest congregation in the world. There are 50,000 house groups. Each group leader is to have been baptized of the Holy Spirit. One outreach of the church is prayer gatherings on Halelujah Mountain where there are four services daily, with thousands at each service. It is for prayer and praise only. The central facility of the Yoida church holds 25,000, which is filled for seven services each Sunday. The main Sunday service is also beamed to 19 satellite stations, on and off site. There are over 600 paid staff people serving the church. The visitors heard Chou speak to 100,000 in Olympic Stadium, which were mostly his cell group assistants. When Chou spoke on prayer to a smaller audience of 20,000 he said that prayer is the key to the survival of his ministry. "The Holy Spirit is my senior partner," he said.

Even though it is a denomination founded by a woman, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, meeting in their world conference in Indianapolis, voted against ordaining women to the ministry. A few weeks earlier the Christian Reformed Church, meeting in the same city, voted to overturn a 150-year old tradition against women preachers. They now allow each congregation to decide for itself if it wishes a woman pastor. The Indianapolis press did not fail to notice that scholars in both churches examined the same biblical evidence and came up with diametrically opposing conclusions.

The woman's role in ministry in Churches of Christ is changing very slowly if at all. But Ouida was with me in a recent visit to the Pecan Grove Church of Christ in Greenville, Tx. when a woman taught the adult class and did it very well. She did not "usurp authority" over men or women but led the class humbly in meaningful dialogue. Women also lead in prayers in other parts of the service. Ouida conceded that it was new to her, seeing women take part in a Church of Christ service like that, but we were both led to wonder how it could be all that wrong. We figured that daughters should also be allowed to speak to the Father when the family of God gathers. But a number of folk have left that church because of the freedom it extends to the sisters.

I was at a Disciples of Christ congregation recently when a woman served at the Communion table, which of course is nothing unusual for that denomination. When she expressed thanksgiving, she said with moving reverence, "Lord, we come before your table with awe . . ." I told her afterward that it was the most touching prayer I had ever heard at the Table. It was the way she said awe. She meant it and we all felt it. I was left wondering how much we miss in our male-dominated worship in Churches of Christ where more than half the members cannot do anything in the service, and they are often the most intelligent, the most creative and poetic, and the most spiritual. Self-deprivation that can be called.

I had a great visit with some 20 students at Princeton Seminary in October, all of whom are of the Stone-Campbell tradition. They have begun what might be called the "Campbell Colloquium" which will meet periodically in reference to their common heritage. I told them their motto ought to be, "Let Christian unity be our polar star," which was the great plea of Barton Stone. When I was a student there long years ago there were but two of us around, and we were tempted to keep it quiet that we were at such a place. Things are changing! My Princeton visit was followed by a weekend with the Liberty Street Church of Christ in Trenton, a great little church with one of the best day care centers around. I helped them in an anniversary celebration.



## READER'S EXCHANGE

Over the years, dear brother, you have helped me understand the teachings of our Lord more clearly that I may follow him more nearly. Praise Him who is in you! — *Gearge McQueary, Ukiah, Ca.*

It just can't be true as you report. There has to be a catch to it somewhere — a Church of Christ where every member is a minister! And in Texas! Has someone discovered that it is possible for a woman to be both in Christ and in the Body, the church, at the same time. Or maybe they don't consider women members! — *Elizabeth Mansur, Bend, Or.*

Your editorial on "How Much Does the Paycheck Influence" goes only half way. Why should a mature church have a hired preacher at all? If I could will it, I would rule that all of our paid clergy must leave the pulpit and devote their energies to proclaiming the gospel to the unsaved, whether one on one, one to ten, or up, and then only would there be a paycheck from dedicated Christians. I have observed that if the pulpit professional is absent for a Sunday, nothing is more predictable than his place will be taken by a visitig professional at a cost of $300. This happened at North Blvd. church when our $60,000 professional was away, another clergyman appeared, while sitting in the audience were a dozen Ph.D.'s and other learned people capable of doing a much better job at no cost to the members. — *Norman Parks, Murfreesboro, Tn.*

In reference to your point that a member can choose a church but a church can't choose its members, I'll have to tell you this story: